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Thinking About Nuclear Weapons

1. The use of nuclear weapons has never, for virtually anyone, been unthinkable: neither for "them" nor for "us."
2. A fortiori, the possession of nuclear weapons, or efforts to acquire them, have never been unthinkable.
3. It is not only second-use, retaliation (or threat of it: deterrence) that has customarily been seen as legitimate, thinkable, a desirable option. This was almost equally true of first-use at the onset of the nuclear era, confronting Nazi Germany and Japan.

There may have been some--unlike Szilard, Conant, FDR, et al--who totally rejected first-use even against Germany (as Szilard, Franck and 67 others did against Japan) or who would have rejected it if they had thought of it at all--but I have not specifically identified them, nor have explicit statements to this effect surfaced.

4. However, a great deal of lying, distortion, concealment and willfull blindness has supported the belief that first-use and first-strike are unthinkable, or at least have not been thought of, in any but the most overwhelmingly desperate circumstances (e.g., averting Nazi victory, achieving Japanese surrender (on such terms as we actually accepted) without an invasion, deterring or resisting Soviet invasion of Western Europe, preempting Soviet nuclear attack on the US).

In particular, this pattern of omission and deception supports the proposition that our leaders do not consider and find it unthinkable to initiate nuclear war, either centrally or regionally, in circumstances less exigent than these supposed cases. This has always been false, for virtually every one of our presidents since FDR.

5. A very high proportion of what passes for "thinking" about the uses of nuclear weapons is best described as wacko, fatheaded, inane, dumb, stupid, puerile, mad, crazy, or wishful. This despite the fact that some of the people doing this "thinking" are, in some spheres, exceptionally brilliant (e.g., in actually developing nuclear weapons) and in some cases, even knowledgeable about politics and bureaucracy and diplomacy (e.g., Kissinger, and for that matter, Nixon).

In the case of internal official thinking, this reflects in part the high sensitivity and secrecy of the subject--i.e., the fact that what is unreservedly thinkable for officials and their advisors is regarded as unthinkable by an important fraction of the

public (and perhaps, for their own wives)--which drastically limits the number of people in the discussion, often to a handful, the types of backgrounds and dispositions brought to bear, and the possibility of critical feedback. Yet even the relatively public discussions, as by Kissinger, Wohlstetter, Kahn and Schelling, show these same qualities of striking omission, neglect of logical or plausible extensions of the argument (Orwell's "doublethink") and at point idiocies, what C. Wright Mills called "crackpot realism."

6. This strain of nuttiness is apart from the issue of moral idiocy/inanity/murderousness that is exhibited in terms of values, aims, priorities, preferences, in lack of compassion or even empathy or concern for human life and suffering, and in lack of inhibitions or near-absolute constraints on risking or inflicted unprecedented, possibly near-absolute devastation. (See James Newman's intemperate characterization of Kahn's "On Thermonuclear War." I recall it to this day: "This evil and tenebrous book, with its looselipped pieties and its hayfoot-strawfoot logic, exudes a bloodthirsty irrationality such as I have not encountered in my years of reading.")

7. Why? Is there something about the Bomb that is prejudicial to reasonable thinking: a kind of force-field around it--or around the notion of it--that bends the thought patterns of otherwise clearheaded men? (It is women, not men, who tend of regard use of the bomb as unthinkable. Not all women, either).

8. This long, fifty-year pattern of bad thinking about the bomb is all too likely to persist in the minds of officials and analysts in nations considering newly acquiring the bomb, as acquisition gets cheaper and easier. And just as was true for their predecessors, this warped thought is likely to support the notion that first-use of the weapon is thinkable, not merely possession or deterrence.

Thus, it is important to realize that this was true even for someone as brilliant and prescient as Szilard, one who was able, even under the pressures of World War II, to reject the plan for first-use against Japan, in contrast to Germany.

